

Sexuality and Marriage



Lesson: Sexuality and Marriage

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Socio-Political Background

The last decades of the eighteenth century witnessed the campaign of the Evangelists for the reform of the manners and morals of the English, which involved a scathing attack on the sexual laxity of the world of Aristocracy.¹ Shocked by the widespread profligacy, debauchery and profanity of their time, Hannah More (1745-1833) and William Wilberforce (1759-1833), the leading figures in the Clapham sect, launched a campaign to revive the spirit of religion, which for them was the only basis of morality. Taking a suggestion from Dr. Woodward's *History of the Society for the Reformation of Manners in the Year 1692*, Wilberforce, persuaded George III to issue a "Royal Proclamation against vice and immorality".² The Evangelists' establishment of the Society for Enforcing the King's Proclamation (1788) described its aims in its prospectus as the attempts "to check the rapid progress of impiety and licentiousness, to promote a spirit of decency and good order, and enforce a stricter execution of the laws against vice and immorality".³ The Proclamation Society deployed the force of law to suppress immorality particularly among the lower classes. Reform of the upper classes had to be made through the power of persuasion. Hannah More's *Thoughts on the Importance of the Manners of the Great to General Society* (1788), written immediately after the proclamation, targeted the religious complacency of the respectable classes, concluding that "To expect to reform the poor while the opulent are corrupt, is to throw odours into the stream while the springs are poisoned."⁴ More's *Estimate of the Religion of the Fashionable World* (1791) commented on the moral

¹ The distinction between Anglican Evangelicalism and Methodism developed in the last decades of the eighteenth century. The break-away group, who identified themselves closely with John Wesley, came to be called Methodists. However, those who remained within the Church of England in order to distance themselves from Dissent were referred to as Evangelicals or more precisely Anglican Evangelicals.

² Robert Isaac Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce*, vol. I (London: John Murray, 1838), pp. 130-132.

³ *Ibid*, vol. I, p. 393.

⁴ Hannah More, *Thoughts on the Importance of the Manners of the Great to General Society*, 4th ed. (London: 1788); quoted in Anne Stott, *Hannah More: the First Victorian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 97.

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depravity, dissoluteness, and laxity of the upper classes as a result of the visible decline of Christianity.



<http://www.acton.org/pub/religion-liberty/volume-5-number-6/william-wilberforce>

In the *Journal* of June, 12, 1787, Wilberforce identified the “general spirit of licentiousness” as the source of all vices.⁵ Under the presidency of Bishop Porteus, the Proclamation Society “greatly checked the spread of blasphemous and indecent publications,” controlling “that most pernicious custom of exhibiting publicly indecent prints.”⁶ The popularity of what was referred to as “the literature of prostitution” provoked the evangelical conscience into a hostile reaction. Hannah More’s *Strictures on the Modern*

⁵ Quoted in *The Life of William Wilberforce*, vol. I, p. 131.

⁶ Robert Hodgson, *Life of the Right Reverend Beilby Porteus* (New York: 1811), pp. 103-105; quoted in Ford K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians: the Age of Wilberforce* (London: Cambridge at the University Press, 1961), p. 85.

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System of Female Education with a View of the Principles and Conduct Prevalent among Women of Rank and Fortune (1799) protested against the familiarity among many women of character with “those monstrous compositions” of Germany, which are full of such feelings and descriptions, “which should not be so much as named among them.”⁷ More argued that women’s exposure to such “contagious” matter leads to a gradual erosion of their character and their irrecoverable ruin.⁸ Complaining that in the German play *The Stranger* the character of the adulteress is portrayed in “the most fascinating and pleasing colors,” More objected to the attempt of the playwright to restore the heroine to the rank of the chaste wives.⁹ Making a disparaging reference to William Godwin’s posthumous publication of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* (1798), More condemned Wollstonecraft’s justification of adultery, and her attack on the restrictions placed on it. More counted Wollstonecraft among that class of writers, whose work “descants on depravity as gravely, and details its grossest acts as frigidly, as if its object were to *allay* the tumult of the passions, while it is letting them loose on mankind, by ‘plucking off the muzzle’ of present restraint and future accountableness.”¹⁰

⁷ Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education with a View of the Principles and Conduct Prevalent among Women of Rank and Fortune*, vol. I (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1811), p. 47.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 48.

⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 49-50.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 50-52.

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www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Hannah-More-The-First-Victorian

Ideology and the Writer

As the self-appointed moral guardian of the nation, Evangelists sought to weed out every reference to sexual activities in literature. In an age, haunted by the fear of the spread of the principles of the French revolution, the books targeted by the Vice Society included not only works of pornography but also the tracts, which "either suggest doubts respecting the truth of Revelation or infuse principles unfavourable to virtue."¹¹ Thomas Bowdler's *Family Shakespeare* (1818) purged Shakespeare of all that was considered bawdy. Robert Pollock's massive project of testing the whole English literature against the touchstone of Christianity remained incomplete due to his untimely death. Evangelists' attempt to impose censorship

¹¹ *Address to the Public from the Society for the Suppression of Vice* (1803), part 2, p. 26; quoted in Ian C. Bradley, *The Call to Seriousness: the Evangelical Impact on the Victorians* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc, 1976), p. 99.

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through Charles Mudie's Select Circulating Library, begun in 1842, molded the literary tastes of the Victorians. The writers who had had an Evangelical childhood or received an Evangelical education exhibited almost the same sense of puritanical attitude towards sexuality. In a letter to Miss Lewis (March, 16, 1839), George Eliot expressed her reservations about Shakespeare's works, stating that one had the need of "as nice a power of distillation as the bee, to suck nothing but honey from his pages."¹² The fragility of Victorian morality, which took offence from slightest hints of sexuality, is pointed out by Charlotte Bronte's defense of the inclusion of the names of Shakespeare and Byron in her recommended list of writers to a correspondent: "No don't be startled at the names of Shakespeare and Byron...You will know how to choose the good, and to avoid the evil; the finest passages are always the purest, the bad are invariably revolting; you will never wish to read them over twice. Omit the comedies of Shakespeare and the 'Don Juan', perhaps the 'Cain', of Byron".¹³ W H Smith, an ardent Methodist, exercised direct censorship over the books sold from his monopolized bookstalls of railway stations. The passage in British Parliament of the Customs Consolidation Act of 1853, which prohibited the import of obscene material, and the Obscene Publication Act of 1857, which authorized magistrates to have the premises of book dealers searched on suspicion and destroy the material if found, added significant components to the nineteenth century war on sexual immorality.

The repression of sexual feelings was such an essential component of the morality of Victorian life that a frank treatment of sexual matters received a strong disapproval. Elizabeth Rigby's review of *Jane Eyre*, published in *The Quarterly Review* (December, 1848) objected to Jane's "illegitimate romance" with Mr. Rochester, who "seeks to violate the laws

¹² J.W. Cross, *George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals* (1885), vol. I, p. 38; quoted in Walter E. Houghton, (1957) *The Victorian Frame of Mind: 1830-1870* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 357.

¹³ Mrs. Gaskell, *Life of Charlotte Bronte* (London: Everyman's Library, 1966), p. 85.

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both of God and man".¹⁴ The character of St John Rivers in *Jane Eyre* is a symbol of the suppression of sexual energy, which is channeled into his tremendous missionary zeal to evangelize India. He is described as "hard and cold", for whom the "humanities and amenities of life had no attraction...its peaceful enjoyments no charm." His "lofty forehead" is "still and pale as a white stone."¹⁵ The conviction of total human depravity entailed in the concept of Original Sin, one of the essential doctrines of Evangelism,¹⁶ meant denial of the flesh, sexual repression. The model of behavior projected in the evangelical writings was the habit of self-restraint. The overwhelming sense of human depravity demanded that daily life be regulated to prevent man's collapse back into the natural condition of sin in which he is born. Wilberforce declared that Christianity "is a state into which we are not born...This is a matter of labour and difficulty, requiring continual watchfulness, and unceasing effort, and unwearied patience."¹⁷ This doctrinal aspect of Evangelism carried within it a constant reminder of one's sinful nature, accompanied by an acute sense of guilt. However, the full force of the impact of Evangelism was felt by women, who were taught to cultivate the habit of self-denial. In the chapter titled "The Early Forming of Habits" in *Strictures*, More argued that by the instillation of "a habit of self-denial" and "the early excision of superfluous desires" in the girls, they will be "rescued from the temptation, to do wrong things, for the sake of enjoyments".¹⁸ In *Jane Eyre*, Mr. Brocklehurst's reprimanding speech to Miss Temple is indicative of the severity of the Evangelists' training in abstinence:

¹⁴ *The Quarterly Review* (December, 1848), in Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre: a Norton Critical Edition*, ed. by Richard J. Dunn, third edition (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001), pp. 451.

¹⁵ *Jane Eyre*, p. 334.

¹⁶ Elisabeth Jay, *The Religion of the Heart: Anglican Evangelicalism and the Nineteenth Century Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 54.

¹⁷ *A View of Practical Christianity*, p. 298; quoted in Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), p.77.

¹⁸ *Strictures*, p. 157.

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You are aware that my plan in bringing up these girls is, not to accustom them to habits of luxury and indulgence, but to render them hardy, patient, self-denying. Should any little accidental disappointment of the appetite occur...the incident ought not to be neutralized by replacing with something more delicate the comfort lost, thus pampering the body and obviating the aim of the institution; it ought to be improved to the spiritual edification of the pupils, by encouraging them to evince fortitude under the temporary privation.¹⁹

On seeing the naturally curled locks of a girl in the Lowood institution, Brocklehurst states that his "mission is to mortify in these girls the lusts of the flesh; to teach them to clothe themselves with shamefacedness and sobriety, not with braided hair and costly apparel."²⁰ In *Jane Eyre*, Rochester's marriage with Bertha Mason uncovers different sets of moral standards applied to the sexual choices of men and women. Instead of condemning Rochester's sexual liaisons with the French courtesan Celine Varens as acts of an unprincipled husband, Jane's primary concern in the novel is to negotiate with Rochester the terms of marriage: "I will not be your English Celine Varnes."²¹

¹⁹ *Jane Eyre*, p. 53.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 54.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 230.

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Peggy-Ann-Garner-as-young-Jane-Eyre-at-Lowood-School-in-Jane-Eyre-1944-x-400-1h2vpef

She feared that his love for her will “effervesce in six months, or less.”²² She did not want to be “a slave in a fool’s paradise at Marseilles.”²³ One of the reasons why she leaves Thornfield is the inequality of “position and fortune” between Jane and Rochester.²⁴ As she declared earlier: “it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God’s feet, equal, as we are!”²⁵ The ending of *Jane Eyre* flattens the class difference as Jane inherits her uncle’s fortune and Rochester is maimed in

²² *Ibid*, p. 221.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 306.

²⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 224-225.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 216.

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the house fire. This attitude towards Rochester's sexual adventures contrasts starkly with Rochester's abhorrence of Bertha Mason, articulated purely in terms of Bertha's sheer physicality, lunacy, and sexuality:

the lunatic sprang and grappled his throat viciously, and laid her to his cheek: they struggled. She is a big woman, in stature almost equaling her husband, and corpulent besides: she showed virile force in the contest- more than once she almost throttled him, athletic as he was.



<http://pxurz.blogspot.in/2012/08/jane-eyre-1983-page-13-of-18.html>

In the mid-nineteenth century, wife was not supposed to display her sexual feelings. Drawing a comparison between Bertha and Jane, Rochester declares:

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Such is the sole conjugal embrace I am ever to know- such are the endearments which are to solace my leisure hours!...Compare these clear eyes with the red balls yonder – this face with that mask- this form with that bulk.²⁶

What makes Jane a worthier wife is her resistance to the outlet of her passions as opposed to Bertha's apparent sexuality and descent into madness. But, the severity of the censure of sexual feelings increased when it came to the unmarried girls. The chief objection raised by the *Saturday Review* of April 14, 1860 to George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss* (1860) was its theme of Maggie's "passion of love." The critic spelled out the assumption on which the criticism of the novel was based: "there are many emotions in female breasts...which would shock friends and critics if put down in black and white." Moreover, it was considered all the more shocking if a female novelist took up this subject. The critic protested a description of "the physical sensations that accompany the meeting of hearts in love." The feminine delicacy of the Victorian kind did not permit "to lay so much stress on the bodily feelings of the other sex." The review concluded that there are certain emotions which ought to be veiled, as the treatment of the subject of tender love does not demand "the conquest of a beautiful arm over honour and principle."²⁷ This is a reference to Maggie's elopement with Stephen in the chapter "Borne along by the Tide":

Stephen sat beside her with her hand in his...Stephen was triumphantly happy...He murmured forth in fragmentary sentences his happiness- his adoration- his tenderness- his belief that their life together must be heaven...Such things, uttered in

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 251.

²⁷ George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. by Carol E. Christ (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1994), pp. 447-448.

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low broken tones by the one voice that has first stirred the fibre of young passion, have only a feeble effect- on experienced minds at a distance from them. To poor Maggie they were very near: they were like nectar held close to thirsty lips: there was, there *must* be, then, a life for mortals here below which was not hard and chill- in which affection would no longer be self-sacrifice.²⁸

In the restrictive structure of Victorian society, Maggie's "fall into that temptation" caused severing of her social ties with her family. Maggie's only way to repentance and redemption was her death in her self-less act of rescuing her brother from the flood.

The Transitional Period

The transition from the seventeenth and early eighteenth century fear of female sexual appetite to the ideal of feminine propriety in the early nineteenth century was in a sense helped by a marked shift in the Protestant redefinition of the role of woman.²⁹ The earlier view saw women as the director inheritors of the sins of the disobedience and fall of Eve. This view emphasized not only the moral deficiency of woman but also the threat their sexuality posed to the moral stability of men and society. In this sense, discussion of the temptations of female sexuality formed an important part of daily and religious discourse. But the religious revival of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was marked by what can be described as the feminization of religion. In *A Practical view of Christianity* (1797), Wilberforce regarded women as "the faithful repositories of the religious principle",

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 380.

²⁹ Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 19.

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who had “a more favourable disposition to religion”.³⁰ In the ideological web of the Evangelical revival, female sexuality, which was traditionally seen as the potential cause of the moral decline of men, was confined to the act of procreation within marriage, that is, motherhood. This new female subject, the mother, was provided access to salvation through motherhood, as Mary was the mother of Jesus Christ. This godly mother was burdened with myriad familial responsibilities. By honestly discharging these responsibilities as mother and wife, she could contain the dangerous aspects of her sexuality.³¹ Hannah More wrote: “On you depend in no small degree the principles of the whole rising generation. To your direction the daughters are almost exclusively committed; and until a certain age, to you also is consigned the mighty privilege of forming the hearts and minds of your infant sons.”³² Mrs. Ann Martin Taylor (1757-1830) in *Practical Hints to Young Females on the Duties of a Wife, a Mother and the Mistress of a Family* (1815) hinted at the idea of professional motherhood, the idea which was more forcefully articulated in the 1830s and 1840s. In 1833, Peter Gaskell wrote: “Love of helpless infancy- attention to its wants, its sufferings, and its unintelligible happiness, seem to form the very well-spring of a woman’s heart- fertilizing, softening, and enriching all her grosser passions and appetites.” Gaskell went on to claim that a woman, “if removed from all intercourse, all knowledge of her sex and its attributes, from the very hour of her birth, would, should she herself become a mother in the wilderness.”³³

³⁰ *Practical View of Christianity*, p. 435; quoted in Jane Rendall, (1985) *The Origins of Feminism: Women in Britain, France and the United States, 1780-1860* (London: Macmillan, 1994), p. 75.

³¹ Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 114.

³² *Strictures*, p. 63.

³³ Peter Gaskell, (1833) *The Manufacturing Population of England, its Moral, Social, and Physical Conditions, and the Changes Which Have Arisen from the Use of Steam Machinery; with an Examination of Infant Labour* (New York: Arno Press, 1972), pp. 144-145.

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<http://www.sil.si.edu/ondisplay/making-homemakerintro.htm>

The reduction of women to her reproductive organs had implications for the ideological construction of separate spheres. The nineteenth century construction of gender emphasized as Tennyson wrote in *The Princess* (1847) that “woman is not undeveloped man/But diverse.” As John Ruskin asserted in 1865: “Each has what the other has not: each completes the other, and is completed by the other: they are in nothing alike”.³⁴ This view of woman as radically different derived considerable strength from the scientific understanding of the female body. What made women radically different from men was their reproductive system. W. Tyler Smith argued in *Lancet* I (1856) that the generative organs of women were suited to a series of bodily functions, which are placed in relation to

³⁴ John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, ed. by C. R. Rounds (New York: American Book Company, 1916), p. 92.

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parental love.³⁵ The result of the sublimation of woman's sexuality into maternal instincts was that she came to be seen as completely devoid of any sexual feelings. In his survey of prostitution in the *Westminster* (July, 1850), W.R. Greg claimed that sexual desire in women "is dormant, if not non-existent, till excited; always till excited by undue familiarities; almost always till excited by actual intercourse." Greg opined that "Women whose position and education have protected them from exciting causes, constantly pass through life without ever being cognizant of the prompting of the senses. Happy for them that it is so!"³⁶ However, Mary Poovey has argued that the late eighteenth century ideal of feminine propriety, instead of rejecting the "specter of female sexuality", transmuted it into its opposite.³⁷

Evangelicalism is termed as the religion of the household. The enormous significance of Sabbath observance for the Evangelist derived from the celebration of Sunday as a family day. Robert and Samuel Wilberforce wrote about his father William Wilberforce's time with his children: "Never was religion seen in a more engaging form than in his Sunday intercourse with them. A festival air of holy and rational happiness dwelt continually around him."³⁸ The Stanley family in Hannah More's *Coelebs in Search of Wife, Comprehending Observations of Domestic Habits and Manners, Religion and Morals* (1807) is presented as an ideal religious home. The sacrality of home was an inevitable consequence of the emphasis placed on the ceremonies of Sabbath ceremonies and family prayers. The link established between home and religion rendered the former a sacred temple from where the Evangelists' onslaught against the universality of sin could be launched. In his writings,

³⁵ Mary Poovey, *Uneven Development: the Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 7.

³⁶ Eric Trudgill, *Madonnas and Magdalens: the Origins and Development of Victorian Sexual Attitudes* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1976), p. 56.

³⁷ *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, p. 19.

³⁸ *Life of William Wilberforce*, vol. III, p. 470.

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Wilberforce frequently opposed the conflicts of the world to the peace and harmony of home. Speaking of his summer retirement from the Parliament, he told Dr. Coulthurst: "This occasional abstraction from the bustle and turmoil of the world, is highly beneficial to mind, body, and estate; and I had an opportunity of becoming acquainted with my own children".³⁹ This kind of opposition built between the private and public served to characterize home as the haven of peace, as opposed to the troubles of the world. Wilberforce wrote in *A Practical View of Christianity* (1797): "when the husband should return to his family, worn and harassed by worldly cares or professional labours, the wife, habitually preserving a warmer and more unimpaired spirit of devotion, than is perhaps consistent with being immersed in the bustle of life, might revive his languid piety."⁴⁰ As the opposition between the private and the public spheres was built up, woman came to be identified with the former, that is, home. In the discourse of the early nineteenth century, home became a sanctified place, in which, as Sarah Stickney Ellis (1799-1872) wrote in *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* (1839): "the humble monitress who sat alone, guarding

³⁹ *Ibid*, vol. III, pp. 468-469.

⁴⁰ *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country Contrasted with Real Christianity* (T. Cadell Jun. and W. Davies, London, 1797), p. 453; quoted in Catherine Hall, *White, Male, and Middle Class*, p. 86.

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www.bjupress.com/resources/christian-school/articles/victorian-home-economics.php

the fireside comforts of his distant home...clothed in moral beauty".⁴¹ John Angell James in *Female Piety; or, the Young Woman's Friend and Guide through Life to Immortality* (1852) provided an exulting description of the word home:

There are few terms in the language around which cluster so many blissful associations as that delight of every English heart, the word home. The paradise of love- the nursery of virtue- the garden of enjoyment- the temple of harmony- the circle of all tender relationships-the playground of childhood-the dwelling of

⁴¹ Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* (1839), in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, fifth edition (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1986), p. 1639.

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manhood- the retreat of age...this, home- sweet home- is the sphere of wedded woman's mission.⁴²

Public Private dichotomy

With the erosion of traditional beliefs in the mid-nineteenth century, the cult of domesticity became a new anchor of beliefs. J. A. Froude in *The Nemesis of Faith* (1849) argued that the words like religion and God are used to fill the emptiness of a purposeless life, but "But there is one strong direction into which the needle of our being, when left to itself, is forever determined...Home-yes, home is the one perfectly pure earthly instinct which we have."⁴³ In this atmosphere of religious uncertainty, Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House* (1854-56) afforded a new idol of devotion. The "Household Gods", who presided over "a temple of the hearth" in John Ruskin's *Sesame and Lillies* (1865), were the new icons of female sexual purity. It is this goddess of chastity which transformed home into "the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division."⁴⁴ In the nineteenth century ideology of domesticity, the maintenance of the sanctity of home as the temple of virtues required both the worship of female purity and the abhorrence of the fallen women, who posed the threat of moral corruption and contamination. As William Acton's *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs, in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age, and Advanced Life, Considered in their Physiological, Social, and Moral Relations* (1857) made a demarcation between "loose or, at least, low and vulgar women", who possess strong

⁴² John Angell James, (1852) *Female Piety; or, the Young Woman's Friend and Guide through Life to Immortality* (Mississippi: Venture Publications a Ministry of Old Paths Baptist Church Independence, n.d.), p. 52.

⁴³ Quoted in *Madonnas and Magdalenes*, p. 42.

⁴⁴ *Sesame and Lillies*, p. 93.

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sexual desires and the “best mothers, wives, and managers of households”, who “know little or nothing of sexual indulgences. Love of home, children, and domestic duties, are the only passion they feel.”⁴⁵

In her book *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987), Nancy Armstrong argued that conduct books of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century defined the domestic woman in opposition to both the corrupting habits of the Aristocratic women, who indulge in idle amusement, and the crudity of the laboring women.⁴⁶ The ideals of middle class domesticity laid a clear demarcation between the superintendence of domestic management, carried out by the middle class wife, and the manual work, undertaken by the servants. Discussing the work of the kitchen, Mrs. Sarah Ellis in *The Wives of England* declared that no sensible woman would consider it “a degradation” to overlook it, but “the vortex of culinary operations” should be “more appropriately left to their servants.”⁴⁷ What was stressed in this ideal was women’s dependence upon her husband, father, or any other male relative. Such a woman might undertake philanthropic activities, but not paid labour. The identification of femininity and home in the middle class constructed a norm against which women of the other classes were judged. Therefore, the category of working class women was a fundamental departure from the middle class ideal of femininity, the ideal in which women and home were bracketed together. The employment of women in the work outside of home was believed to compromise their femininity. Working class women were

⁴⁵ William Acton’s *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs, in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age, and Advanced Life, Considered in their Physiological, Social, and Moral Relations* (1857); quoted in Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: a Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), pp. 29-33.

⁴⁶ Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: a Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 75-76.

⁴⁷ Mrs. Ellis, *The Wives of England: their Relative Duties, Domestic Influence, and Social Obligations* (London: Fisher, Son and Co., 1843), p. 261; quoted in June Purvis, *Hard Lessons: the Lives and Education of Working-class Women in Nineteenth-century England* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p. 60.

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viewed as deficient in matters of domestic economy. Mrs. Austin's description of the homes of working class women conveys a sense of disorder: "It is impossible to conceive the waste and improvidence which reigns in the lowest English households. The women buy improvidently, cook improvidently, and dress improvidently. The consequences are, want, debt, disorder".⁴⁸ In Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), Stephen Blackpool's wife is embodiment of all the social maladies for which working class women were blamed by the middle classes. She is not the ideal wife, whose charms around the hearth afford comfort to her husband. The reasons Stephen gives to Bounderby for desiring to separate from her is:

I ha' lived under't so long, for that I ha' had'n the pity and comforting words o' th' best lass living or dead.⁴⁹

The idea of "Home, sweet, Home" as a shelter from the conflicts of the world falls flat on its face in its applicability to the economically constricted existence of the working class families. This explains Stephen's reluctance to go home:

O! Better to have no home which to lay his head, than to have a home and dread to go to it, through such a cause.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Mrs. Austin, *Two Letters on Girls' Schools and on the Training of Working Women* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1857), p. 25; quoted in *Hard Lessons*, p. 65.

⁴⁹ Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, ed. by Fred Kaplan and Sylvere Monod (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001), p. 59.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 64-65.

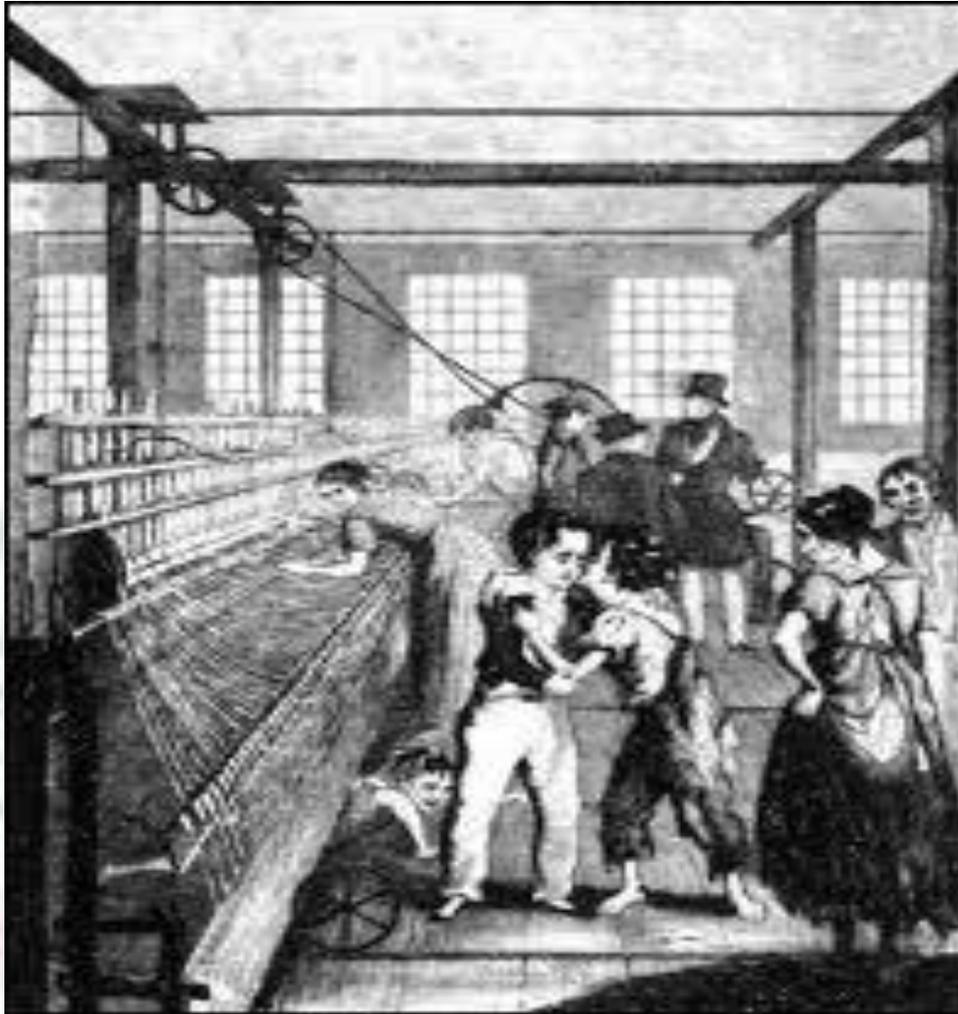
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The Social Construct of Gender

The ideological construction of gender along class lines portrayed women who worked outside as morally corrupt. The assumption on which such a portrayal was made was that women's exposure to the corrupting forces in society shall taint their innocence and chastity. Protection of women's sexual purity was considered central to the harmonious functioning of society. John Thorneley gave evidence to the Mines Commission in 1842 on women's work, calling women's employment in coal pits "the most demoralizing practice", as the "youths of both sexes work often in a half-naked state" with the consequence that "Sexual intercourse decidedly frequently occurs in consequence."⁵¹

⁵¹ Quoted in *The Origins of Modern Feminism*, p. 195.

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Similarly, Dr. Gaskell accused that the chastity of marriage is hard to find in the working women, as "husbands and wife sin equally".⁵² In *Hard Times*, the vulgarity, sexuality, immorality, and lack of cleanliness and etiquettes of Stephen's drunkard wife are underlined in the novel to invoke a sense of disgust.

⁵² Quoted in *The Origins of Modern Feminism*, p. 195.

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Such a woman! A disabled, drunken creature, barely able to preserve her sitting posture by steadying herself with one begrimed hand on the floor, while the other was so purposeless in trying to push away her tangled hair from her face, that it only blinded her the more with the dirt upon it. A creature so foul to look at, in her tatters, stains, and splashes, but so much fouler than that in her moral infamy, that it was a shameful thing even to see her.⁵³



<http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/darley11.html>

As opposed to the “debauched features” of Stephen’s wife, Rachael is depicted as “an Angel”, who is “too merciful” to let the wife die. Though Rachael works in the factory, her mere presence provides Stephen a sense of comfort. The description of the house when

⁵³ *Hard Times*, p. 55.

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Rachael is attending Stephen's sick wife is indicative of the attraction of the ideal of a good wife even in the working class:

Everything was in its place and order as he had always kept it, the little fire was newly trimmed, and the hearth was freshly swept.⁵⁴

The characters of Rachael and Stephen's wife in *Hard Times* are created along the nineteenth century dualistic division of women into the angel and the prostitute.

In nineteenth century England, which was above all the age of reform, attempts at the moral reformation of the nation helped ossify what is popularly known as Victorian prudery. In an age in which sexuality and morality were counterpoised to each other, emphasis on sexual purity became a justification of women's sexual repression and missionary zeal. Doctrine of separate sexual spheres led to the creation of the Angel in the house, and the valorization of the ideals of motherhood. The cult of home unfolded a whole new paraphernalia in which women's drudgery took on the name of professional domesticity.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 66.

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