

WOMEN IN THE MIDDLE CLASS IN THE 19TH CENTURY

The nineteenth century for Europe and America has been called the "century of the middle class." Growth in both power and prestige of the middle class was perhaps the most important single development in social and economic history. Prior to the nineteenth century, there was a recognizable middle class, but it was not large. With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, new wealth was created, and concomitantly the middle class became the harbingers of morals, the work ethic, and numerous other characteristics that have become part of our fabric of society.

Who were the middle class? It was not a homogeneous unit in terms of occupation or income, but usually one received a salary rather than hourly wages. What today we would call a white collar worker. Included in this group called the middle class were ministers, lawyers, teachers, doctors, bureaucrats, business tycoons, traders, and shop keepers.

The middle class were devoted to the ideal of family and home. During this time the home displaced the church as a refuge and spiritual haven. Home became a status symbol and emotional bulwark against the rude commercial world. The father was the master of the household. Middle class family rituals helped to sustain this hierarchy, with the father at the head of the table during meals. A popular adage of the day was "children were to be seen not heard." The wife was to be subject to her husband as well, and often treated as a superior servant not as an equal. Alfred Lord Tennyson's immortal words convey the wife's task to keep the household functioning smoothly and harmoniously: "Man for the field, 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."

Home became the center of virtue and the proper life for women. The wife was not to do outside work. Historians are not certain why this happened. For centuries the wife aided her husband in his business. Many times the rearing of children was left to nurses and governesses. Now men began doing business only with other men. With the wife not contributing economically to the family finances, there was a definite lessening of her status within society. Middle class women were encouraged to be only dabblers in education and to pursue cultural endeavors of drawing, painting, singing or playing the piano. Finishing schools will eventually be established to foster these "talents."

Women were to be married by twenty-one, and expected to begin having children immediately. Marriage was viewed almost as the sole vocation open to middle class women. These Victorian women (from 1837 to the end of the century, Queen Victoria ruled Great Britain, giving her name to this period of history) were given the epitaph "angel of the house" for their supposed innate spirituality. Not only were the women held responsible for the moral education of their children, but a wife was

supposed to elevate her husband's morality by being his spiritual advisor. A wife was expected to woo her husband to the benefits of home and family, and away from his natural instincts. As Sara Ellis, whose guide was widely read stated: "wife's principal duty was to raise the tone of her husband's mind and to lead his thoughts to repose on those subjects which convey a feeling of identity with a higher state of existence beyond this present life." Now the word "lady" no longer was reserved just for aristocratic ladies, but applied to middle class women in general. "Lord" was still used for aristocratic men only, however.

Throughout the century and into the next one, the double standard prevailed regarding marriage and divorce laws. When a couple became engaged in England, her property was now his. Married women were barred from making contracts, appearing as witnesses in court, and initiating lawsuits. A wife's legal personality was subsumed under her husband's. Criminal acts of the wife were the responsibility of her husband's except for most offenses like murder. This system of coverture is outlined well by the noted jurist William Blackstone in his Commentaries on the Laws of England: "If husband and wife were one body before God, they were one person in the law and that person was represented by the husband." In most other European countries and America this femme coverture as it was called, was the law too.

Reform of the marriage laws was a popular discussion subject for women of the middle class. In 1857 the Matrimonial Causes Act in England set up secular divorce courts. Prior to that, each divorce in England required a separate act of Parliament.¹ Here too the double standard prevailed. A husband needed only to show evidence of his wife's adultery to obtain a divorce, her property and custody of their children. A wife had to show evidence of other marital failings besides adultery to get a divorce like cruelty, incest, rape or desertion. Because of the lengthy legality of the provisions, the divorce rate remained low throughout the nineteenth century - only about 2%. It was not until the last few decades of the twentieth century that the restrictions on women getting a divorce were lifted.

Magazines and books directed toward women in the nineteenth century began to praise motherhood, domesticity, religion and charity as the proper work of women. Lady's Home Journal and Godey's Ladybook were two of these journals. In England Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management became a best-seller, second only in sales to the King James Bible. Preparation of simple meals to grand dinner parties, directions for various chores in the house, and many other household wisdom tips were incorporated into this publication. In France a similar book was popular, The Lady's Rustic Household by Cora-Elizabeth Millet-Robinet.

¹Since Henry VIII's manipulated his religion to gain a divorce from his wife Catherine of Aragon, divorce was an option for the Church of England (English were no longer Catholic), but only infrequently used.

Women's frailty was the subject of much printed material. Middle class European and American women were seen as feeble creatures who became invalids for a few days each month. Menstruation was seen by doctors and women alike as a disability. As late as 1878 the British Medical Journal ran a six-months' correspondence on whether hams could be turned rancid by the touch of a menstruating woman. The dichotomy existed where some women were considered too frail to walk alone in the street, while other women were working underground in coal mines.

Sexual mores were perhaps the most startling. Up to the nineteenth century, women were usually perceived as over-sexed and the cause of men's moral shortcomings. Now middle class wives were seen as the better half in a marriage because they were pure, innocent, childlike and asexual. In keeping with this "childlike" posture, the legal age of consent for women was changed in England from twelve to sixteen. Since the ancient Romans and early Christians, twelve was the age for legal consummation of marriages. For the Victorians, the wife's sexuality was to be denied, and she must not respond to her husband's sexual advances with equal passion. The English physician Lord William Acton in his many medical texts and sex manuals that became extremely popular, further elucidated this asexuality by stating: "There can be no doubt that sexual feeling in the female is in the majority of cases in abeyance; and even if roused which in many instances it never can be, it is very moderate compared with that of the male." As suggested by private diaries, if the wife was passionate she would find it hard not to feel guilty about pleasure she was presumed too pure to feel. While the middle class enjoyed sexual relations within marriage far more than was formerly thought, Victorian suppression of sexual matters became legendary. Euphemisms were used to explain delicate subjects: Bosom and bust for breast, limb for leg, second joint of the chicken for thigh, maternal nutriment for breast feeding, and an unhappy condition for pregnancy. Writing to one of her daughters to prepare her for her first childbirth experience, Queen Victoria said: "childbirth was a complete violence to all one's feelings of propriety - which God knows receives a shock enough in marriage alone."

Women of the upper and middle classes were especially preoccupied with the variety and complexity of dress, which showed their status and position. This has always been true regardless of the historical era, though. Particularly geared to the fashions for most of the nineteenth century were long skirts and blouses that emphasized a small waist, ample bosom, and inaccessibility. Constrictive corsets functioned as brassieres and girdles, causing many medical maladies: curvature of the spine, dislocation of the ribs, dizziness, and headaches. Even the removal of one or two ribs to keep your waistline small enough for your husband to fit his hands around you was done. Around 1887 fashions changed, ridding the women of the bustle, simplifying the shirts, but making the sleeves more extensive. Movement of the arms was now difficult for women. Reformers like America's Amelia

Bloomer were introduced into the fashion world, but changes did not occur until the advent of the railroad, bus, and bicycle, where less restrictive clothing was necessary.

As marriage was the normal and expected role for middle class women to follow, those that did not marry were regarded as social failures and treated with pity and contempt. Legal documents called these women spinsters. Statistics state that the number of unmarried women started increasing in the nineteenth century, and today it is extremely high. While 20% of men did not marry, society did not impugn them when they said they could not afford it. It was erroneously thought that women who remained single did so mainly by choice, not from lack of suitors. This was not true, though.

Economically, poor genteel single girls were in an untenable position as they were prevented by law and tradition from entering those professions that could have given them an adequate income. After much agitation about reform, late in the century legislation was passed that allowed for them to enter the fields of medicine, law and civil service, by attending universities and colleges. Before that a single middle class woman had basically two choices: writing or being a governess. This is the reason why so many nineteenth century novels have governesses as their heroines. For the young women, being a governess was the last resort and a much-feared fate. As the governess was somewhere between a servant and a lady, she did not belong to either class. The celebrated Bronte sisters of England illustrate this, especially the famous novel by Charlotte, Jane Eyre, a book that has never been out of print since it was first published in 1847. Attempts were made to aid these young women by the formation of an English Governesses Benevolent Institution, a job register and a pension fund. Founding the first college for women in England, the Queen's College, this organization made possible this teachers' training school, and it will be a signal for others to follow.

By the mid-nineteenth century thousands of European and American women were writing for a living. These publications were primarily novels that were read by other women. Most of the writers upheld traditional values of society, i.e. the angel in the house motif or the cult of domesticity. Some writers, though, began to assert themselves, like Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot (ie. Marian Evans), and George Sand (Amandine Lucie Dupin).² As indicative of two of these writers, they had to use men's names to get published. This was also true of the Bronte sisters, first publishing under the last name of Bell with Ellis for Emily, Currer for Charlotte and Acton for Anne.

Yet what is remarkable, unmarried women were more legally independent than the married ones. Single women could own property, pay taxes to the state, and vote in the local parish, none of which married women were allowed to do.

²Dupin's love affair with the composer and pianist Chopin was made into a recent movie, Impromptu.

For both married and single women, charity and reform work will become popular, after the first half of the nineteenth century when women were finding their "Angel in the House" role too confining and narrow. Women now sought to expand their moral influence outside the home. Public service by volunteering turned these women into an active force for change and improvement. In the past, women had done charity work through their religious affiliations, but now it was outside the churches. In England, women established the following clubs, schools, and societies to help those less fortunate like: "poor youth," "poor young women," "fallen women," "handicapped children and adults," and "prisoners."

In Catholic countries new nursing and charity organizations were established in great numbers: Sisters of Mercy, Franciscan Sisters of the Poor, Sisters of St. Charles, and Daughters of Divine Providence, to name a few. In both Protestant and Catholic countries, women became missionaries, travelling to Asia, Africa and other places. Most of the charities aided other women and children.

Here are some specific examples of these women, who in many instances became famous for their endeavors. Henriette Schrader-Breymann, a German woman, became the founder of the Kindergarten movement, that will be exported to other countries, including America. A Frenchwoman founded the Creche society, a nursery for infants and preschool for children of working mothers, serving as the role model for thousands of future ones. Women invented new ways to raise money for their charities. This was the advent of the thrift shop, charity bazaar, fundraising dinner or dance, and collection and distribution drives of clothing and other useful items.

Hannah More, (1745-1833,) was instrumental in the establishment of Sunday schools in England to improve the religious education of the poor, which included teaching them to read. Major reforms were instituted for women prisoners with the work of Elizabeth Fry 1780-1845. Overly crowded conditions, no bedding, no adequate cloth or disposal systems, led Elizabeth to improve the lot of women at Newgate Prison in London. Not only improving these harsh conditions, she set up a way for them to learn a trade while in prison. These prisoners were given part of the profits from the garments they made and sold upon their release. Fry founded the British Society of Ladies for Promoting the Reformation of Female Prisoners, and her ideas spread abroad. So impressed were the authorities, that Elizabeth Fry became the first woman called to testify before a British Parliamentary Committee.

With the exception of Queen Victoria, Florence Nightingale was the most famous woman of her century. Legendary for her nursing work at the front lines during the Crimean War, she later made nursing the real profession it is today with a set of prerequisite qualifications and ethical standards. Before her reforms, hospitals were where only the poor went to, and then only leaving in a coffin.

Since the Reformation in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the advent of university-trained professional physicians who systemically ousted the midwives and other women from health care, nursing had a bad reputation. Depicted as drunks and fallen women, respectful women did not take up such work. In France, a different scenario was present. The Sisters of Charity was a distinct nursing order that served those hospitalized. Florence Nightingale, after returning to England from the war, spent half a century furthering the revamping of hospital care and the English nursing profession. Her family was not supportive of her efforts, and wanted Florence to take care of only her own family's needs. Hateful of this "lady bountiful" role, it nevertheless took many years for Florence to persevere in her endeavors. In her essay published in 1852 entitled Cassandra, she lamented society's obstacles to middle class women developing skills to support themselves. She also detailed her thoughts that she had to act as a man to achieve her life's ambitions. Florence was not alone in this idea. Exceptional women throughout history have tended to identify with like-minded men, rather than other women. Women did not support unusual or exceptional women, unless they acted within traditional roles.

As the only daughter of an upper class Anglo-Irish family, Frances Power Cobbe, 1822-1904, worked to eliminate the constant problem of husbands beating their wives. In an 1878 article entitled "Wife-Torture in England," Frances documented the horrors working class wives especially were subjected to. Observing that wife-beating was exacerbated by alcohol, prostitution, and appalling living conditions, she clearly recognized that the fundamental cause of wife abuse was the conventional attitudes towards females. Beating one's wife or wives was acceptable and legal throughout recorded history until the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe and America. As a result of Cobbe's endeavors, Parliament amended the Matrimonial Causes Act, giving wives the opportunity to separate from their husbands for aggravated assault, the first law of its kind.

Catherine Booth, (1829-1890) co-founded with her husband William, the Salvation Army, the English organization that expanded world-wide, and is still going strong today. The Salvation Army was not only an organized and official church, but a refuge for the hungry and homeless. Catherine became a powerful public speaker and feminist after years of silence, and these characteristics were used to further the Christian doctrines of the church. Their formula of feeding the hungry and then preaching to them, ensured the Salvation Army's success. In a 1882 survey of London, on one weeknight there were almost 17,000 worshipping with the Salvation Army, compared to only 11,000 in the ordinary churches. Catherine along with other reforming women, led the charge against poor working conditions for women, especially those that made matches. Proving that most other European

countries did not use the toxic yellow phosphorus, but harmless red phosphorus. Eventually William Booth would intone: "The best men in my army are the women."

Women's philanthropical work was harshly criticized by some middle class people during the nineteenth century. Mrs. Sarah Ellis, a major writer for women and the cult of domesticity, remarked that charity began at home and should stay there. The famous English writer Charles Dickens and the French writers Balzac and Flaubert depicted female hypocrites, women who did philanthropic work because it tended to put them in the right circles as well as an excuse for leaving the home. Scholars of women's history today criticize these last mentioned writers as wrong in their beliefs that these women were not sincere. They say charity work took real courage and devotion, and cannot be categorized as either fashionable or frivolous.

Women were a powerful force to help others. Perhaps the best summation of women's charity work can be surmised by the obituary of Madame Emile Delesalle, printed in a nineteenth century Catholic paper in France:

"the poor were the object of her affectionate interest, especially the shameful poor, the fallen people. She sought them out and helped them with perfect discretion which doubled the value of her benevolent interest. To those whom she could approach without fear of bruising their dignity, she brought, along with alms to assure their existence, consolation of the most serious sort - she raised their courage and their hopes. To others each Sunday, she opened all the doors of her home, above all when her children were still young. In making them distribute these alms with her, she hoped to initiate them early into practices of charity."