

TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES

Gender Roles in the 19th Century (excerpt)

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During the Victorian period men and women's roles became more sharply defined than at any time in history. In earlier centuries it had been usual for women to work alongside husbands and brothers in the family business. Living "over the shop" made it easy for women to help out by serving customers or keeping accounts while also attending to their domestic duties. As the 19th century progressed men increasingly commuted to their place of work – the factory, shop or office. Wives, daughters and sisters were left at home all day to oversee the domestic duties that were increasingly carried out by servants. From the 1830s, women started to adopt the crinoline, a huge bell-shaped skirt that made it virtually impossible to clean a grate or sweep the stairs without tumbling over.

Separate spheres

The two sexes now inhabited what Victorians thought of as "separate spheres," only coming together at breakfast and again at dinner.

The ideology of Separate Spheres rested on a definition of the "natural" characteristics of women and men. Women were considered physically weaker yet morally superior to men, which meant that they were best suited to the domestic sphere. Not only was it their job to counterbalance the moral taint of the public sphere in which their husbands labored all day, they were also preparing the next generation to carry on this way of life. The fact that women had such great influence at home was used as an argument against giving them the vote.

Educating women

Women did, though, require a new kind of education to prepare them for this role of “Angel in the House.” Rather than attracting a husband through their domestic abilities, middle-class girls were coached in what were known as ‘accomplishments’. These would be learned either at boarding school or from a resident governess. In *Pride & Prejudice* the snobbish Caroline Bingley lists the skills required by any young lady who considers herself accomplished:

“A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages....; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions...”

As Miss Bingley emphasizes, it was important for a well-educated girl to soften her erudition with a graceful and feminine manner. No one wanted to be called a “blue-stocking,” the name given to women who had devoted themselves too enthusiastically to intellectual pursuits. Blue-stockings were considered unfeminine and off-putting in the way that they attempted to usurp men’s “natural” intellectual superiority. Some doctors reported that too much study actually had a damaging effect on the ovaries, turning attractive young women into dried-up prunes. Later in the century, when Oxford and Cambridge opened their doors to women, many families refused to let their clever daughters attend for fear that they would make themselves unmarriageable.

Marriage and sexuality

At the same time, a young girl was not expected to focus too obviously on finding a husband. Being “forward” in the company of men suggested a worrying sexual appetite. Women were assumed to desire marriage because it

allowed them to become mothers rather than to pursue sexual or emotional satisfaction...

Girls usually married in their early to mid-20s. Typically, the groom would be five years older. Not only did this reinforce the “natural” hierarchy between the sexes, but it also made sound financial sense. A young man needed to be able to show that he earned enough money to support a wife and any future children before the girl’s father would give his permission. Some unfortunate couples were obliged to endure an engagement lasting decades before they could afford to marry.

If a young man was particularly pious he might manage to stay chaste until he married. Many respectable young men, however, resorted to using prostitutes...Young and not-so-young women had no choice but to stay chaste until marriage. They were not even allowed to speak to men unless there was a married woman present as a chaperone. Higher education or professional work was also out of the question....

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